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University of Indiana Convocation - Assessment in Vietnam

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

THE DESIRABILITY OF A RESOLUTION OF OUR INVOLVEMENT IN VIETNAM

Mr. PELL. Mr. President, the problem of Vietnam and what we should do in achieving a decent resolution of our involvement in that wartorn, unhappy land is a problem that looms over the thinking, the plans, and the aspirations of us all.

There is no Senator amongst us who is more familiar and knowledgeable concerning this problem than is the senior Senator from Montana [Mr. MANSFIELD], whose knowledge of the area and whose experience with its people is great.

The distinguished Senator from Montana made a singularly perceptive and forthright speech at the convocation of the University of Indiana a week ago today. In the course of that speech, the Senator made the fundamental point that—

> There is no obligation to continue to pour out the blood and resources of this Nation until South Vietnam is made safe for one Vietnamese faction or another.

The Senator also cited the sad statistics when he made his speech a week ago that reveal that there were 543 young American men who had been killed in the preceding 7 days. That was the highest weekly total of deaths in the war. Today, only 1 week later, we find that we have reached the second highest total of deaths of the war, 470 deaths have occurred. This brings us to a total of 13,709 young men killed and 115,144 wounded in this unhappy war—a total that is not far from the total young men killed and wounded in the Korean conflict.

These mounting casualty figures of the United States alone—figures that do not include the young Vietnamese men, women, and children that have been and are being killed in North and South Vietnam—I believe show, stress, and underline the importance of the speech of the Senator from Montana and make it singularly significant today.

I call the speech to the attention of my colleagues and ask unanimous consent that it be printed at this point in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the speech was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

ASSESSMENT IN VIETNAM

(Remarks of Senator MIKE MANSFIELD, of Montana, at the Indiana University Convocation, Bloomington, Ind., February 23, 1968)

The struggle in Vietnam has turned grim, pitiless, and devastating. The casualty figures are staggering. The physical damage is enormous. Men, women, children, soldiers, guerrillas, weapons, machines, cities, towns, and villages—all are thrown together in an inferno of destruction.

It is not surprising that the situation has been interpreted in some quarters as approaching some sort of climax. It may well be, as has been suggested, the beginning of the end. The question is what beginning and what end? Peace by military victory? Peace by negotiations? With whom? For what? There is no certainty at this point as to what will emerge in Vietnam, or for that matter, whether the end of this war is to be found in Vietnam.

I have no desire, therefore, to indulge, today, in what has become a kind of parlor game called "Who's winning in Vietnam?" It is offensive to me, as I know it must be to you, to hear this deadly conflict treated as some sort of athletic contest. The lives of too many young Americans are on the line in Vietnam. Too many bewildered men and women and children are being burnt, bloodied and broken by this war. Too much is in ruins. Too many lie dead. Vietnam is not a game. There can be no winners; there are only losers and the longer the war persists the greater are the losses for all concerned.

The tragedy of Vietnam constrains us all to great sobriety in discussion. There is little point in speculating on the current clashes—who is winning and who is not or what is being won and what is not. The need is to try to define accurately the character of the present tragedy and, in that way, hopefully, to see more clearly what the interests of this nation will require in the days ahead.

In this respect, seldom has a problem presented greater difficulties than Vietnam and seldom has the need for a solution been

greater. A restoration of peace is imperative for the welfare of the people of Vietnam; they have been fought over for so long that, in the millions, they are torn from their ancestral places seeking refuge where there is no refuge. For us, too, an honorable solution is of the utmost urgency. The war in Vietnam has been deeply divisive in its effects on this nation. It has diverted energy and resources from the great needs of our own society. The vast difficulties of the urban areas, for example, cry out for attention, but the cry is barely heard above the din of the distant conflict.

The nation's economic equilibrium is in danger of being thrown out of kilter by the immense demands of the war. In this connection, we have already suffered a significant degree of inflation. Furthermore, we are confronted with what can only be called the embarrassment of having to discourage the travel of Americans abroad, because of difficulties which the war and other foreign commitments have introduced into the nation's balance of payments.

In our relations with the rest of the world, the war in Vietnam has placed formidable blocks in the way of further progress in international cooperation. It has brought in its wake new threats to the stability of peace, as in the case of the U.S.S. *Pueblo* incident which may be but the precursor of others. In these pinpoints of instability, moreover, there are ever-present threats to the frail defenses of the world against nuclear catastrophe.

We did not arrive at this situation overnight. Our involvement in Vietnam is not new born. If we are at a crossroads, today, it is but one in a chain of crossroads which extends backwards for many years. There comes to mind, for example, the moment of the French collapse and the Geneva Conferences of 1954; the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 and the replacement of civilian government in Saigon by a series of unstable regimes, drawn ever more steadily from military sources, ever more dependent on the United States. Finally, there comes to mind the Tonkin Bay incident and the large-scale direct military engagement of the United States thereafter in the war in Vietnam.

In retrospect it is apparent that at each of these crossroads the American military involvement has deepened. It is also apparent that the successive increases in military commitment have led, so far, not to peace, but rather to an increase in counter military commitment. At the end of 1965, five Senators including myself visited Vietnam. In a report made public at the conclusion of our study, we stated that we had found that this nation's military effort was ". . . pressing against a military situation which is, in effect, open ended. How open is dependent on the extent to which North Vietnam and its supporters are willing and able to meet increased force by increased force."

How open the war? How able and willing the opposing forces to meet increased force by increased force?

Our armed forces in Vietnam have increased from 23,000 at the beginning of 1965 to more than half a million today. The bombing of North Vietnam by air and sea has grown from specific retaliation for specific Viet Cong acts of offense against our forces into the most systematic air and naval bombardment since World War II. The tonnage of explosives which has fallen upon Vietnam is already higher than in Korea, or, for that matter, in the entire Pacific Theatre during World War II and probably close to that unloosed in Europe. Moreover, one by one, the limitations on bombing-targets in North Vietnam have been removed until a mere handful is all that now stands against indiscriminate destruction of life and property. Indeed, the search for an elusive victory has led some to clamor for that indiscriminate destruction, even to the point of returning Vietnam to the Stone Age.

With escalation has come mounting losses of life on all sides. U.S. casualty lists are already longer in the first five or six weeks of 1968 than they were during the entire year of 1965. In all of 1965, 1,369 Americans were killed. By February 10, this year, 1,674 Americans had already been killed. According to reports issued in Saigon on yesterday, 543 additional Americans were killed in the last seven days, the highest weekly total of the war. The over-all figures now stand at 18,239 deaths and the wounded total 112,469. Among the opposing forces, of course, there are reports of astronmical increases in men killed, taken prisoner, or deserting.

I cite these gruesome figures to indicate the immense growth in the scope of the conflict, particularly as it has involved the United States. I find it most inappropriate that this effort and these great sacrifices are, in effect, called inadequate in some quarters. The fact is that, short of what Prime Minister Wilson has called the "lunacy" of nuclear war, this nation has made a massive military effort in Vietnam. The effort has been made by dedicated Americans, ably led, who have carried out their orders with courage and skill. At this late date, it ought at least to be clear that if the situation in Vietnam has not changed as anticipated, it has not been for want of an extraordinary military effort by the United States. American forces may well have done too much but by no stretch of the imagination can it be said that they have done to little.

Nevertheless, the reality is that the situation has not changed as anticipated. At the time of my last visit to Vietnam in 1965, available estimates indicated that 22 percent of the population of South Vietnam has under control of the National Liberation Front, 60 percent under government control, and 18 percent contested. At the end of last year, the Saigon government was reported as controlling 67 percent of the population, presumably a gain of 7 percent. Substantial progress was also reported in the so-called pacification program which had been designed to strengthen and expand Saigon's control over the rural areas.

Then came the wave of attacks against the cities of South Vietnam. One can put whatever interpretation one chooses on these recent clashes. Whatever else they may mean, they bring into question the validity of the measures of military progress which have been used in Saigon. They bring into question the effectiveness of the Saigon political structure, in its present form. They bring into question the pacification program which appears to have gone the route of at least a dozen prior contrived techniques for "winning the people" of Vietnam. They make clear, finally, that the cities of South Vietnam which have heretofore been spared, almost by tacit agreement, have now been drawn fully into the vortex of the war's terrible devastation.

Whatever the outcome of the present battles, the basic military problem is as it has been from the outset. The war remains open-ended and escalation continues to rise with escalation. The National Liberation Front remains omnipresent, from the demilitarized zone at the 17th parallel to the southern tip of the peninsula. Its regular forces and guerrillas are obviously steeled to accept great privation and to make enormous sacrifices. The Viet Cong remain entrenched and virtually untouched in their traditional strongholds—the swamps, paddyfields and hamlets of the Mekong Delta—from whence they are able to dispatch forces to reinforce units which, as is now apparent, honeycomb Saigon and other cities.

It is dangerous to presume that either the forces of the National Liberation Front or North Vietnam are nearing the end of the rope. Actually, Hanoi has committed to the war in the South considerably less than a quarter of the forces of General Vo Nguyen Giap, who is generally credited with masterminding the current military strategy in the South. And beyond North Vietnam lies the untapped manpower of China and the supply sources of both China and the Soviet Union.

These are some of the realities which are not measured by the computers of "progress" in Saigon. These are some of the realities which seem to me to make it imperative to recall the original purposes of the American commitment to South Vietnam. They were, above all else, limited purposes. There is not now and there has never been a mandate to take over a war. The commitment is to support not to supplant.

At the outset, it was not an American responsibility and it is not now an American responsibility to win a victory for any particular group of Vietnamese or to defeat any particular group of Vietnamese. Even if we could, it is not in the interests of this nation to synthesize a political structure for South Vietnam. That is not and ought not ever to become the function of the American military command, the American economists, administrators, diplomats, political scientists, aid-officials, and others who are gathered in Vietnam. The sooner that the limits of our commitment are understood by all directly concerned the better for all concerned.

It is time to recognize that our immense effort has already gone a long way to alter the character of what was once an inner struggle among Vietnamese. It is also time to recognize that whatever we may do, the future of Vietnam depends not on us but on the Vietnamese themselves. It is their country; they live in it. They will be living in it long after we are gone from it.

Our responsibility is to sustain, not to submerge. To strip the Vietnamese struggle of its Vietnamese character, to convert it into a war to be won or lost by this nation, is to detract from its relevance both to the people of Vietnam and to the people of the United States. To do so is to consolidate an American involvement on the Southeast Asian mainland of indefinite duration and obscure purposes whose terminus is not visible—not in Vietnam, not in Laos, or in Cambodia. Indeed, it may well be an involvement which is without exit except in World War III.

This nation is deeply committed in South Vietnam but let us not make the mistake of interpreting that commitment as compelling us—in the name of victory or whatever—to see to it that every last member of the NLF is either dulled, dead, captive, or in flight. That course leads not to an ending but to an endless succession of violent beginnings.

An inextricable involvement of American forces in Vietnam may meet the needs of some but it accords neither with the interests of the United States or the people of Vietnam. In this connection, President Johnson has repeatedly stated that this nation's objective is ". . . only that the people of South Vietnam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way." He has stated that he is willing to move at any time in negotiations which might bring about that result. He has stated that we are prepared to move out lock, stock, and barrel in a matter of months after a satisfactory settlement is achieved.

It should be clear, therefore, to all concerned—Americans and Vietnamese in Washington, in Saigon, and in Hanoi and to whomever, wherever—that that is the accurate measure of this nation's commitment. There is no obligation to continue to pour out the blood and resources of this nation until South Vietnam is made safe for one Vietnamese faction or another. On the contrary, there is an obligation to the people of the United States to conserve that blood and those resources and, to the people of Vietnam, there is an obligation to avoid the

destruction of their land and society even in the name of saving them.

Indeed, in my judgment, there is now little prospect of meeting these deep obligations to the people of this nation and to the people of Vietnam unless there is a prompt cessation of the bloodletting and the negotiation of an honorable settlement. For that reason, every possibility of peace must continue to be explored fully and with the utmost urgency.

The North Vietnamese have stated that they will open negotiations if the bombing of the North is discontinued. In that connection, it should be noted, first, that the bombing has not achieved the purposes for which it was sanctioned. The bombing has not stopped the movement of men and supplies into the South; on the contrary, the routes of infiltration carry a heavier traffic than ever before and the traffic includes ever more sophisticated weapons. The bombing has done little, if anything, for the morale of the people of South Vietnam and such indications as there are, suggest that it has done a great deal to strengthen the determination of the people of North Vietnam. Finally, the bombing has not yet brought Hanoi to the conference table, as a suspension, now, probably will. In short, the bombing of the North has added a vast dimension to the war. It has raised the cost of the war in lives and resources—American and other—but it has not brought closer—so far as can be seen—an honorable end to the conflict.

It is in this context that I have endorsed a proposal to confine the bombing to the infiltration routes at the 17th parallel. It may be that in this proposal, which was advanced initially by Senator Cooper of Kentucky—a former Ambassador to India—may be found a first step to peace. I am frank to state, however, that while there is reason to expect an opening of negotiations if the bombing of the North is curbed, it is not at all certain that negotiations, in turn, will bring the conflict to an honorable conclusion. Negotiations may be futile; they may fail. In the end, they may prove no more effective, than military escalation has proved to be, in bringing this war to an acceptable end.

Indeed, it is not likely that negotiations will be fruitful at this time if the conflict is defined as a simple, clear-cut case of aggression on the part of the North against the South or as some sort of final test which has pitted the forces of freedom in Vietnam in a showdown against Communism. The reality in Vietnam is far more complex, both in the relationships which exist between North and South Vietnam and among the various groups and elements within South Vietnam. How complex, for example, is indicated by the composition of the present government in Saigon. It is based almost entirely upon a military faction and most of its principals are not Southern Vietnamese but Northern Vietnamese. They are clearly not the whole coin of political leadership in South Vietnam. There are other sources of indigenous leadership, other groups which are without significant voice in the present Southern political structure.

It would be an advance towards peace, in my judgment, if the door to reconciliation could be opened among South Vietnamese of all political inclinations. If that is not to be, however, I cannot see that the diplomacy of this nation must remain hog-tied by the inflexibility of others. The responsibilities which are owed to the people of this nation and Vietnam urge the seeking of an honorable peace, wherever and however it may be found and regardless of who may be willing to join in the search.

It is possible that the divergent fears and interests which are involved—directly and indirectly—in the Vietnamese conflict may still be reconcilable on the basis of the Geneva Accords of 1954 and 1962. These agreements might still provide a framework for determining, in peace, the future relationship of the two parts of Vietnam and for guaranteeing the neutralization of Vietnam and of Indochina. A reactivation of the Geneva Conference, therefore, by the co-chairmen—the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union—is clearly desirable. Geneva, however, is not necessarily the only beacon of peace and, in any event, it has yet to be lit. If the Secretary-General of the United Nations, a group of Asian nations, European nations, African nations, Communist nations or any combination thereof were prepared and able to convene a peace conference, those approaches, too, are obviously worthy of every consideration.

The Senate voted a resolution on November 30th last, urging that Vietnam be brought actively before the Security Council of the United Nations. The proposal was for a direct approach to the problem by means of the open processes of the U.N. Charter.

At the very least, an initiative in the U.N. Security Council would help to clarify the significance of the words of peace which are raised on all sides. At the very least, it could help to emphasize this nation's readiness to take its chances on a peaceful settlement of the conflict in accord with the world-sanctioned premises of the Charter.

In my judgment, we should and can make clear, by procedural vote, that we are willing to submit this question of Vietnam to the Security Council. We should and can make clear, by procedural vote, that we are prepared to invite any nation or group which is of relevance to a settlement, including Hanoi and the NLF and China, to participate in a face-to-face discussion of the war. We should and can make clear, by procedural vote, that if the emotions kindled by the conflict render undesirable a meeting of the Security Council in New York, we are prepared to see the Council meet in Geneva or anywhere else, as provided for by the Charter. In short, we should and can make clear, by votes, that we are willing to follow the U.N. path to peace.

It would seem that among the 15 member nations of the Security Council, there ought to be found at least the required nine votes to respond to an initiative of the United States, calling for a U.N. effort to open the door to a settlement in Vietnam.

Nevertheless, if such is not the case, it seems desirable to know now, by formal and open test, win or lose, who is willing and who is unwilling to confront the issue of peace in Vietnam before the bar of the world. May I say that it does no service to the United Nations to shrink from bringing before it a situation which involves its fundamental reason for being.

On this point, I would note, too, that the members of the U.N. ought not to overlook the obligations of the organization in connection with the rising tensions in Korea. The U.N. has been involved—deeply involved—for two decades in Korea. It was with the sanction of the U.N. that this nation carried the main burden of the war which was fought in Korea. It was with U.N. guidance that the truce in Korea was achieved. It is still within the competence of the U.N. to deal with the unresolved questions of Korea, and, in particular, when they pose threats of renewed war.

Insofar as this nation's unilateral responsibilities respecting Korea are concerned, the firm restraint which President Johnson has exercised from the outset in the Pueblo affair, in my judgment, has set a wise course. The question is being pursued quietly at the Panmunjom truce site in discussions between or representatives and those of North Korea. Third-party channels are also being explored. In short, the effort at this time is to seek by diplomacy the release of the crewmen alive—I repeat, alive. It is a prudent course in what is, at best, a delicate and dangerous situation and it deserves every support.

Talks at Panmunjon and the search for third party intercession, however, do not begin to exhaust the possibilities of solution. If these efforts do not bear fruit, other options may also be available. The President has already had the matter raised at the U.N. Security Council by Ambassador Goldberg. If necessary, it can and should be pressed anew in that forum. It may be feasible, thereby, to seek an impartial investigation, arbitration or mediation of the dispute or a presentation of the entire matter to the World Court.

Whatever the specific recourse, in my judgment, the efforts to find a peaceful settlement of the Pueblo affair are attuned to this nation's interest. What matters, first, is the safe release of the crewmen. What matters most is the substance not the shadow of this nation's interests.

The flare-up in Korea, coming on top of Vietnam, indicates the hydra-headed potential of war on the Asian continent. The new and dangerous confrontation in the former suggests the urgency of ending the conflict on an honorable basis in the latter. I do not know what the prospect for peace may be by way of the U.N. approach which has been suggested. Obviously, a U.N. approach cannot be any less effective than the countless other approaches which have already been attempted without success. On the other hand, it may not be any more effective.

In any event, somewhere, somehow, there must be the beginnings of a negotiated settlement. Until it is found, the fires of conflict will blaze ever more fiercely in Vietnam; the arc of war's wreckage will continue to open on the continent of Asia. And if the fires burn out of control to World War III, what nation will then claim the victory? Indeed, what nation will be left to claim it?